# 13 Wagnerian Manipulation
## *Bayreuth and Nineteenth-Century Sciences of the Mind*

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In one of the most striking passages in his 1892 jeremiad *Degeneration*, the physician and critic Max Nordau suggested that Richard Wagner's theory of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* meant that his works could 'degrade man to the undifferentiated sense perceptions of the pholas or oyster'.[1] By reducing human perception to one sense, he argued, the audio-visual spectacle at Bayreuth would amount to an attempt literally to reverse evolution in order to suit the brains of a degenerate audience overwhelmed by the stimulations of the modern world.[2] Far from being an eccentric aside, Nordau's remarks drew on an extensive scientific and medical critique of the multimedia character of the Bayreuth experience focused on its sensory neurophysiological dangers.[3] Many contemporaries made similar arguments, worrying that the all-round sensory experience at Bayreuth was an uninvited attempt to stimulate the nerves, subvert rational thought and leave viewers in a pathological trance state.

This critique of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* as passive brain stimulation can be found not only in Nordau's intemperate book but in a wide range of other critics, authors, scientists and physicians including Eduard Hanslick, Friedrich Nietzsche and later figures such as Bertolt Brecht and Theodor W. Adorno, reflecting anxieties about the unconscious, sexuality, self-control and social order in an uncertain modern world. Wagner may have argued that his *Gesamtkunstwerk* was a return to ancient unity in the arts, but his quintessentially modern innovations, such as the darkened auditorium, the hidden orchestra and his elaborate stage machinery, made his theatre at Bayreuth arguably one of the most extraordinary sensual experiences of the nineteenth century.[4] Debate concerning the vulnerability of audiences to this sensory manipulation was in many ways just as modern, with as much in common with twentieth- and twenty-first-century ambivalence about the impact of cinema, TV and the Internet on the brain and its neurology

[1] Nordau 1895, 176. This metaphor was surprisingly common. See Hanslick 1950, 127, and Sydow 1921, 206.

[2] Nordau 1895, 207. [3] See Kennaway 2005. [4] See Spotts 1994.

as with traditional operatic criticism.[5] This chapter seeks to show the debt owed to late nineteenth-century sciences of the mind, especially medicine, psychiatry and psychology, in creating the framework for this critique of the ultra-modern Bayreuth media experience.

Popular criticism of Wagner might have generally focused on caricatures of hefty sopranos, stamina-testing longueurs and sheer volume, but it is striking that Wagner's most persistent and thought-provoking critics, far from denying the *Gesamtkunstwerk*'s power, have generally attacked it for being *too good* at manipulating its audience. The supposed power of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* to undermine the self-awareness and attention of those in the audience via brain stimulation was often understood at the time in terms of discourses on drugs and hypnosis.[6] In the 1870s and 1880s hypnotism emerged from its quasi-occult past to be an important part of neurology and psychiatry, becoming a vital means of discussing anxieties about affective contagion and its dangers in the emerging era of mass society. The idea of hypnotism fitted in a broader medical critique of the Romantic aesthetics and ethics of opera in which it almost seemed a duty to be swept away into quasi-mystical ecstasy.[7]

The debate on hypnosis and on the *Gesamtkunstwerk*'s impact on the brain in turn owed much to developing scientific conceptions of the mind. A more materialist physiological model of mind that understood mental life in terms of automatic reflex response to stimuli, restrained by an inhibiting willpower, was influential in the final decades of the nineteenth century.[8] The work of the likes of Henry Maudsley, Théodule Ribot, as well as that of Jean-Martin Charcot and his colleagues at the Salpêtrière hospital in Paris, offered a mechanistic model of how the mind worked which not only laid the ground for broad cultural assumptions underpinning the debate on Bayreuth, but also was often referred to directly.[9] Although this model was later challenged by a less physiological view put forward by William James, Hippolyte Bernheim, Sigmund Freud and others, similar automatic models of the mind have been revived intermittently since, notably with Behaviourism and the rise of twenty-first-century 'neuromania'.[10] Paradoxically, the mechanistic stimulation response model of the mind made willpower the centrepiece of ideas about the regulation of an embodied self. In the face of societies confronted by the

[5] Kittler 1999; Adorno 2005; see also A. Williams 1997. [6] See Kennaway 2012b.
[7] Johnson 1995; Winter 1998; Voskuhl 2007; Castelvecchi 2013, 125–60.
[8] R. Smith 1992; Hacking 1995; N. Rose 2012.
[9] See Maudsley 1883; Ribot 1883; Charcot 1886–93; Herrmann 2007;.
[10] See Peretz and Zatorre 2003;Levitin 2006; Patel 2006; Sacks 2008 .

dislocations of industrialisation, the necessity of individual self-control (especially sexual continence) to maintain health, sanity and social order was repeatedly emphasised. Many described this self-mastery as a kind of 'mental hygiene' that was necessary to ward off the contagious stimulations of modern life. For Nordau, for instance, an inability to pay attention, to control perception with willpower, was the 'disease of the century'.[11] The scientific critique of Bayreuth was a strikingly early example of the very modern discourse of a moral and physiological struggle between the excessive stimulations of multimedia and this conception of individual autonomy.

Such arguments were often echoed in twentieth-century anxieties about cinema and its seemingly hypnotic powers. Among other things, this helps explain why Friedrich Kittler called Nietzsche's writings on Wagner a critique of film *avant la lettre*.[12] Only twelve years separated Wagner's death in 1883 and the official invention of the cinematograph in 1895, and – as commentators from Adorno to Jeongwon Joe have argued – cinema has proved to be arguably one of the most important heirs of Bayreuth's phantasmagorical aesthetic.[13] Certainly Wagner's integrated and technologically sophisticated works were as close to early film as anything in their era; for this reason Adorno spoke – in a famous misreading of Wagner – of 'the birth of film from the spirit of music'.[14] Like Bayreuth, the cinema was marked as modern, degenerate, female and as a threat to masculine, rational autonomy, replete with the same metaphors of hypnosis and passivity.[15] Indeed, Stefan Andriopoulos has written of 'the structural affinity between cinematography and hypnosis around 1900'.[16] More recently, work by Jeffrey Zacks on the neuroscience of film has given a new depth to older concerns about the impact of moving images on the brain.[17]

The critique of Bayreuth as a form of stimulation was predicated on contemporary medical and scientific theories, notably the theory of *dégénérescences* developed by Bénédict Morel in the 1850s that argued that vice and sickness could be passed down by successively weaker generations, and George Beard's neurasthenia diagnosis that saw urban over-

[11] Schulte 1997, 179. [12] Kittler 1999, 184. [13] See Gilman and Joe 2010.

[14] 'in ihm ereignet die Geburt des Films aus dem Geiste der Musik.' Adorno 2005, 100–1.

[15] See Kracauer 1963.

[16] 'der strukturellen Affinität von Kinematographie und Hypnose um 1900'. Andriopoulos 2000, 23. This point was seconded by Jean Cocteau, who wrote of film as 'collective hypnosis' ('die kollektive Hypnose'). Kittler 1999, 224.

[17] Zacks 2014.

stimulation as the cause of nervous sickness.[18] The sensory excitement experienced at Bayreuth was regularly portrayed as a form of quintessentially modern technological stimulation likely to lead to the pathological fatigue of neurasthenia. An oft-cited example is the psychiatrist Richard von Krafft-Ebing, who included Wagner's music in a list of dangerous forms of 'abnormal stimulation' associated with modernity.[19] An inability to resist stimulation was also a symptom, since neurasthenics suffered from a weakness of 'memory, attention, judgement, will and the resistance to impressions' as Leon Bouveret put it in his 1890 *La Neurasthénie*.[20] Likewise, fears that excessive stimulation would rob members of the audience of the ability to pay attention were matched by the suggestion that Wagner's music appealed to degenerate spectators, those lacking in attention from an inborn evolutionary flaw. For Nordau, Wagner's 'endless melody' and stage spectacle were signs of degeneration, since the 'degenerate is not in a condition to fix his attention long'.[21]

Until the 1920s most of the medicalised critique of Bayreuth as the site of quasi-hypnotic mind-control was of a conservative bent, fretting about its impact on morals. As is well known, in the twentieth century the notion of Wagner's work as sense manipulation on the brink of hypnosis became part of a left-wing critique of the Culture Industry and 'phantasmagoria', especially in the work of Adorno and Brecht. Bayreuth, with its supposed ability to anaesthetise critical thought and stimulate unconscious desires and libidinal drives, was portrayed as a forerunner of mass consumerist culture and indeed of fascist propaganda. Its mimetic, affective contagion was the antithesis of the critical thinking and political engagement demanded by the nascent Frankfurt School. It is striking that there was a high level of continuity between the medical critique of the late nineteenth century and the political version during the Weimar Republic. In particular, both eras shared anxieties about modern media and the rational self as technology and a developing culture of audience silence and attention combined to radically intensify the passivity of spectatorship.[22]

In what follows, I first consider the pioneering stage technology used in the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, in particular at Wagner's own theatre at Bayreuth, the extravagance of which caused the physician and historian Theodor Puschmann to denounce its 'unprecedented luxury in decoration and

[18] Morel 1857. [19] Krafft-Ebing 1903, 71, 10.

[20] 'Sie äussert sich in verminderter Ausdauer aller Gehirnkräfte, insbesondere des Gedächtnisses, der Aufmerksamkeit, des Urtheils, des Willens und der Widerstandskraft gegen Empfindungen und Gemüthseindrücke.' Bouveret 1893, 34.

[21] Nordau 1895, 199, 21. [22] Johnson 1995; Sennett 2003.

machinery, only thinkable in the dissipated imagination of a madman' in his 1872 pathography *Richard Wagner: eine psychiatrische Studie*.[23] It then looks at discussion of innovations such as the darkened auditorium and hidden orchestra in the context of contemporary theories of hypnosis and narcosis. Thereafter, it examines the brain stimulation model of the mind that provided the basis for the language of trance used to disparage Wagner's multimedia spectacle, and shows how the fear of loss of autonomy and willpower was directly addressed in attacks on Bayreuth. The conclusion touches on the afterlife of these anxieties within the more political debate on Wagner during the interwar period, and closes by discussing the value of understanding this debate on Bayreuth as an early example of a kind of neurophysiological critique of media that is currently enjoying renewed influence.[24] The furore around suggestions that modern technology is 'rewiring' our brains, occasioned by books such as Susan Greenfield's *Mind Change: How Digital Technologies are Leaving their Mark on our Brains*, has a surprising amount in common with the late nineteenth-century discourse on Wagner.[25] An examination of the medicalised debate surrounding Bayreuth might serve as a reminder for us today of the pitfalls of an appeal to the prestige of science in attempts to explain complex social phenomena in biological reductionist terms.

## The *Gesamtkunstwerk* as Hypnotic Media Technology

The creation of a new Wagner theatre at Bayreuth, despite the existence in the city of the Markgräfliches Opernhaus, allowed Wagner to indulge his ideas about stage design and the organisation of a theatre. Although incremental changes in the technical aspects of the theatre laid the groundwork for the innovations of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, commentators have made clear that it marked a real departure in media technology. Kittler famously described the 1865 premiere of *Tristan und Isolde* as the 'beginning of modern mass media'.[26] Wagner's artistic vision demanded elaborate visual tableaux, especially in the *Ring*, with its gods walking over the rainbow bridge, Alberich turning from a dragon into a frog, Brünnhilde

[23] 'unerhörten Luxus in Dekoration und Maschinerien, wie sie eben nur die ausschweifende Phantasie eines in Überschwenglichkeit schwelgenden Wahnsinnigen zu erdenken vermag'. Puschmann 1872, 30.

[24] See, for example, Lehrer 2007 and Andreason 2005. [25] Greenfield 2014.

[26] Kittler 1987, 208.

being surrounded by a wall of fire, and the burning of Valhalla. Bayreuth's technical director, Carl Brandt, realised Wagner's plans as best he could by using coloured steam, pulsating gas illuminations and even electric lights to give the impression of moving water around the Rhine Maidens on their 'swimming carriages'.[27] Such was the role of this state-of-the-art stage equipment that the critic Eduard Hanslick could write: 'we have seen with astonishment the colossal machinery, the gas apparatus, the steam machines above and below the stage at Bayreuth. Wagner could as little have composed the *Ring* before the invention of the electric light as without the harp or bass tuba.'[28] All this technological novelty was quickly co-opted within a medical and scientific critique of Wagner's work as a potential threat to self-control. Nordau, for instance, described the *Gesamtkunstwerk*'s 'variegated pomp, the most fantastic pictures, and the liveliest impressions of light and colour' as 'besieging' the mind via the eye, just as he and others fretted about the over-stimulation of the ear.[29]

One aspect of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* that marked it as a threat to rational autonomy was its 'illusionist' aesthetic: the radical suspension of disbelief and the denial of the artificial character of the action on stage that the critic Paul Bekker called 'the absolute reality of the unreal'.[30] A crucial element in this illusion was the double proscenium arch suggested by the architect Gottfried Semper, which created a receding perspective to make the stage look bigger, making the illusion more complete by achieving what Semper described as 'the desired separation of the ideal world of the stage from the real world on the other side'.[31] Another aspect of this illusionism was of course the innovation of the hidden orchestra, which was introduced not only to dampen the sound of the instruments so that the singers could be heard but also to add to the visual illusion by obscuring the musicians from view. The fear was often expressed that the hidden orchestra could bypass the conscious mind and influence the audience directly via neural stimulation, using the best possible acoustics.[32] Hanslick, for example, suggested that it had the effect of 'a mild opium jag' (*Opiumrausch*), switching off the rational mind.[33] At the time of the first Bayreuth *Ring* in 1876, the Wagnerian Heinrich Porges gave an insight into the unconscious effect that the production aimed to achieve with these techniques when he wrote that 'it will be as though we were experiencing the magical effects of an

[27] Srocke 1988.
[28] Hanslick 1950, 171. In fact electric lighting was first used by Giacomo Meyerbeer in 1849. See Campana 2015, 28–33.
[29] Nordau 1895, 174. See Kennaway 2012a, 63–98. [30] Adorno 2005, 90. See Kämmerer 1990.
[31] Gutman 1990, 340. [32] Huysmans 1959, 27. [33] Hanslick 1950, 170

ideal presence; as though no longer conscious of the music'.[34] This notion of the audience not being conscious of the illusory character of what is affecting them is key to understanding the supposed 'subliminal' effect of the new Bayreuth environment.

The use of light and the darkening of the auditorium also added considerably to the illusionist aesthetic. Audiences at the Paris Opéra had experienced similar things since 1822, but Wagner's use of gaslight at Bayreuth, allowing brightening and dimming to be used as dramatic effects, aroused a good deal of attention. The radical extension of the gradual shift to a brighter stage and a darker theatre that had been going on for decades served to focus attention on the stage and to lull audiences into a receptive state in which they more fully suspended their disbelief. Mark Twain remarked that darkening the Bayreuth auditorium created an effect akin to a 'congregation sat in a deep and solemn gloom', so rapt in attention that they looked as if they had been turned to brass.[35] Tolstoy's 1897 book *What is Art?* also referred to the darkening of the auditorium and the hidden orchestra as proof that 'we have here no question of art, but one of hypnotism'. Comparing it to a spiritualist séance, Tolstoy underscored the comparison with chemically altered mental states by arguing that the experience of sitting in the dark with people rendered 'half-crazy . . . can be still more quickly attained by getting drunk or smoking opium'. He went on to link these metaphors of narcosis and hypnosis directly with anxiety about the impact of this fixed attention on the brains and the autonomy of the audience. The stimulation of 'the auditory nerves' and 'the brain' in the dark and 'in company with people who are not quite normal' would mean – he wrote – that the audience would be in an 'abnormal condition and be enchanted by absurdities'.[36]

As we see from these examples, discussions of the manipulative power of the technological innovations at Bayreuth were often put in terms of specific scientific and medical theories of trance states and self-control. The idea of possession, of the loss of self, may seem distant from modern concerns, but beneath the language of medicine, it is in fact a persistent anxiety of modernity. The eighteenth and nineteenth centuries saw a radical recasting of trance states from a spiritual and religious context to that of medicine, and a fascination with sleepwalkers and hypnotised subjects as a form of victory of lower forces in the brain over higher, more rational principles. The late nineteenth-century debate on hypnosis, in particular, became the focus of the expression of anxieties, in scientific

[34] Porges 1983, 7–8. [35] Twain 1917, 211. [36] Tolstoy 1904, 140–1, 143.

circles and beyond, about the fragility of the rational self. Its roots lay in Mesmerism, the semi-occult medical practice developed by Franz Anton Mesmer in the late eighteenth century that suggested that an invisible animal magnetic force surrounding us could be manipulated by a 'magnetiseur', putting patients into a trance state and thereby solving various health problems. From the 1840s the Scottish surgeon James Braid attempted to move the medical study of trance states away from the speculative hocus-pocus that had become associated with Mesmerism.[37] It was often suggested that music and hypnosis were closely linked, both in Mesmerist and more scientific circles. Both dealt with untouchable forces, and there were numerous reports of unmusical people suddenly developing talent during a trance, while in complementary fashion musicians were often believed to be particularly susceptible to hypnotism.[38]

As it turns out, the work that laid the foundations for the widespread accusation that the *Gesamtkunstwerk* was hypnotic in its effects took place primarily in France, with competing models asserted at the Salpêtrière and in the provincial city of Nancy, both of which directly influenced discussions of artistic culture. In Paris, Jean-Martin Charcot and his colleagues conducted many experiments, often performed in front of an audience, which seemed to demonstrate that direct sensory stimulation, including from tuning forks, gongs and songs, could induce cataleptic fits among hysterical women.[39] For instance, the physician and artist Paul Richer wrote in his 1881 *Études cliniques sur la grande hystérie ou hystéro-épilepsie* about 'the influence of music on hysteria', which he linked to 'catalepsy, lethargy and somnambulism'.[40] Like his Salpêtrière colleagues, Richer was adamant that hypnotic states, including those induced by sound and music, were essentially neurological reflex actions among hysterics and little to do with the conscious mind. As the German physiologist Rudolf Heidenhain put it in 1880, hypnosis was the result of brain stimulation – 'the inhibition of the activity of the ganglion-cells of the cerebral cortex' caused by the 'gentle prolonged stimulation of the sensory nerves of the face, or of the auditory . . . nerve' – that is, exactly the mechanism many suspected to be at work at Bayreuth.[41] This research on trance states had

[37] [unsigned] 1847a, 602; Braid 1843, 56. [38] See Braid 1843, 193–6; Tuckey 1893.

[39] Binet and Féré 1905, 88–9, 93. See also Regnard 1887, 260–3 and Didi-Huberman 2003, 209–13.

[40] 'Il est donc rationnel de penser que l'influence de la musique sur les accès d'hystérie se borne aux accès convulsifs sans perte de connaissance, et aux variétés de l'attaque dans lesquelles la sensibilité spéciale persiste quelquefois, comme dans la catalepsie, la léthargie et le somnambulisme.' Richer 1881, 600.

[41] Heidenhain 1880, 49.

significant cultural influence on discussions of music, but became a significant context in the reception of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* only in the final decades of the nineteenth century; it is not mentioned in Puschmann's otherwise very thorough 'psychiatric study' of Wagner from 1872, for instance.

Later, though, it came naturally to many observers to draw on the Salpêtrière model of hypnosis when describing the behaviour of some of Wagner's characters, notably Kundry.[42] Physicians at the Salpêtrière themselves contributed to the cultural and the literary impact of such theories. Charles Richet, for one, wrote a novel entitled *Sœur Marthe* (1889), in which the eponymous protagonist is frozen in catalepsy because of music.[43] Drawing on the same research, Wagner's hypnotic music dramas were compared to the clinical demonstrations at the Salpêtrière. The nineteenth-century American critic James Huneker described Wagner in no uncertain terms as the 'Klingsor of Bayreuth [who] hypnotizes his hearers with two or three themes not of themselves remarkable, as Charcot controls his patients with a shining mirror', and Nordau followed suit, arguing: 'this music was certainly of a nature to fascinate the hysterical. Its powerful orchestral effects produced hypnotic states (at the Salpêtrière hospital in Paris the hypnotic state is often induced by suddenly striking a gong).'[44] Nietzsche compared Wagner's work to hypnosis several times, and his debt to French theories of trance states, especially those of Charles Féré, has been well documented.[45] In *The Case of Wagner*, to give just one example, he described the *Lohengrin* overture as a study of 'how to hypnotise with music'.[46] Charcotian conceptions of the mind and of hypnosis thus became a lens through which to understand the modern media experience of Bayreuth far beyond medical circles, providing a model of passive stimulation that suited a wide variety of agendas.

However, the Salpêtrière view of trance states was certainly challenged at the time. The Swedish writer and physician Axel Munthe, who had worked there, later declared: 'almost every single one of Charcot's theories on hypnotism has been proved wrong'. The women observed, he suggested, were examples of 'post-hypnotic suggestions' or 'mere frauds . . . delighted to perform their various tricks in public'.[47] The theory of the Nancy neurologist Hippolyte Bernheim, who asserted that hypnosis was essentially a matter of suggestion, not neurological disease, and that it was

[42] Nietzsche described Wagner's heroines as a 'hysterical-hypnotic type' 'hysterisch-hypnotische Typus.' Borchmeyer and Salaquarda 1994, 2:1041. See also Pfohl 1889, and Myles Jackson's chapter in this volume.

[43] Epheyre 1890, 54. See also l'Isle-Adam 1986. [44] Nordau 1895, 200–1. [45] Lampl 1986.

[46] Nietzsche 1969, VI.3, § 7. [47] Munthe 2004, 215, 207.

something that could potentially be experienced by anyone, not just hysterics, became the standard view. This explanation for the supposed quasi-hypnotic power of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* resonated much less with Wagner's critics than Charcot's more mechanistic view. Although Nietzsche denounced Wagner's theatricality as a means of 'strengthening gestures, suggestion, the psychological-picturesque', and others explained Klingsor's power over Kundry in terms of suggestion, without the brain's 'stimulus and response' model of the mind, the whole idea of hypnosis became a less effective stick with which to beat the *Gesamtkunstwerk* in this more sceptical environment.[48] However, although new subjective and individual paradigms for understanding hypnotism and parallel developments such as William James's work on ideomotor actions offered little to critics of Wagner, the sense that Bayreuth might have hypnotic dangers remained fixed in the public imagination.

## Stimulation, Willpower and the Sciences of the Mind

The critique of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* as a hypnotic form of stimulation was thus based on particular medical understandings of trance states. At a deeper level, it also relied on contemporary neurological understandings of the brain and the mind. A model of the mind as a kind of machine that responded to stimuli and which attempted to explain mental states as a form of higher reflex was an ideal foundation for a critique of media stimulation. It made the physical and moral reactions of the audience to media a matter of objective physiology to be analysed by a physician rather than something related to subjective experience. Medicalised critiques of culture based on the development of this neurological conception of mind go back to the Scientific Revolution, as George Rousseau has shown.[49] By the eighteenth century neurophysiology had become, in Philipp Sarasin's words, an 'apparatus of the Subject' – a powerful new way of explaining human behaviour and self-understanding.[50] The work of physicians and scientists from Robert Whytt in the 1750s to Johannes Peter Müller in the 1830s on reflex action laid the foundations for nineteenth-century theories that sought to explain human actions and mental states in terms of automatic response.[51]

[48] 'eine Theater-Rhetorik, ein Mittel des Ausdrucks, der Gebärden-Verstärkung, der Suggestion, des Psychologisch-Pittoresken'. Nietzsche 1969, VI.3 §8. Preyer 1890, 118.
[49] G. Rousseau 2004. [50] Sarasin 2007, 54.
[51] Whytt 1768; J. Müller 1835–40, 1:688–701. See Clarke and Jacyna 1987, 470–1.

In the context of such neurological conceptions of the mind, the concept of willpower took on increasing importance in conceptions of mental health, becoming an important part of the new dietetics, moral therapy and psychological medicine, as bourgeois values of restraint were institutionalised in psychiatric thinking. If the experience of the world is a matter of stimulation, then it was vital to control one's responses for the sake of hygiene and order. This development can be seen in the 'Moral Therapy' tradition in Britain, as well as the continental Romantic psychological medicine such as Ernst von Feuchtersleben's *Dietetics of the Soul* and Etienne Jean Georget's work in the 1820s on 'lesions of the will', all of which emphasised the role of the psyche in the creation and treatment of mental illness.[52] Subsequent medical sources often retained an interest in willpower and self-control despite a more somatic approach to mental health, as one can see in work such as Henry Maudsley's *Body and Will*, Theo Hyslop's *Mental Physiology*, Friedrich's *Maladies of the Will* and Karl Birnbaum's *Pathological Weakness of the Will*.[53] Many medical observers argued that willpower's principal purpose was to regulate imagination and sensuality, and to maintain a 'state of inhibitory perfection'.[54] The French psychologist Théodule Ribot, whose journal Nietzsche knew well, spoke for many when he described the will as a 'power of arrestation, or, in the language of physiology, an inhibitive power'.[55] This conception of the will as a regulator of desires gave it a central role in thinking on crime and morality, providing an apparently objective basis for a medical and scientific replacement for moral and legal strictures, reflecting the level of continuity from older religious and moral models of self-control. There was a wide consensus that the stimulations of the modern world made particularly high demands on the will; the mind's grasp over the body seemed increasingly 'tenuous but imperative', as Roger Smith has argued.[56]

Critiques of the supposed modern sensory overload involved in the *Gesamtkunstwerk* were often directly related to a dangerous loss of self-control, as noted above. Nietzsche is only the most famous commentator to allude to Wagner's destructive impact on the will and autonomy of the audience, as well as the failure of willpower at the heart of the composer's philosophy.[57] Indeed, he wrote repeatedly about Wagner as a threat to

[52] Laffey 2003; Feuchtersleben 1838; Georget 1825.

[53] Maudsley 1883; Friedrich 1885; Hyslop 1895; Birnbaum 1911. See also Jacyna 1981; Daston 1982; Hagner 1999.

[54] Clouston 1906, 80. See Taylor 1989, 303. [55] Ribot 1894, 10. [56] R. Smith 1992, 1–2.

[57] Nidesh Lawtoo (2008) perceptively links Nietzsche's hostility to the *Gesamtkunstwerk*'s hypnotic powers to Plato's rejection of mimesis as form of enthusiasm or possession, an intolerable loss of self-control by the actors and, via affective contagion, of the audience, too.

willpower, as 'a typical decadent, who lacks any kind of "free will"', and whose work involves a 'dissolution of the will'.[58] This threat to selfhood, Nietzsche argued, was closely linked to the multimedia theatrical character of Wagner's work. The 'restlessness of the visual element' was connected to the 'convulsive nature of his effects, his over-stimulated sensibility', he suggested.[59] The result is mass culture with a degraded self: 'in the theatre one is honest only as mass; as an individual one lies', he wrote in *The Gay Science* – 'One leaves one's self at home when one goes to the theatre.'[60]

Like hypnosis and phantasmagoria, drugs appeared to operate at the boundary of the physiological and the psychological where their external, chemical forces seemed able to undermine willpower. Drug addiction was widely understood as a 'disease of the will', both a symptom and a cause of weak willpower, since only people lacking in will would be seduced by drugs, and those drugs would then destroy their remaining self-control.[61] This was perhaps the principal reason for the frequency with which Wagner's works were compared to narcotics.[62] Nietzsche repeatedly turned to drug references in his critique of Wagner, labelling Wagner's art an 'opiate of the senses' and discussing its 'opium-like and narcotic effects'.[63] Similarly, Hanslick compared Wagner's work to 'the hashish dream of the ecstatic female', while the Nobel Prize-winning German novelist Paul Heyse talked in 1872 of Wagnerian 'hashish-obfuscation' (*Haschisch-Benebelung*).[64] Another reason was the connection between Wagnerian music and an addiction to stimulations (be they media effects or narcotics) in degeneration theory: degenerates 'crave for a stimulus', as Nordau noted.[65] Wagner's works were for some writers symptomatic of this kind of physiological craving. For instance, in his book on music and nerves, the German psychologist Ernst Jentsch wrote of Wagner's modern 'effects', which he linked to 'the constantly growing dependency on narcotics'.[66] Theories of willpower, degeneration and addiction thus

[58] 'ein typischer décadent, bei dem jeder "freie Wille" fehlt', 'Disgregation des Willens'. Nietzsche 1969, VI.3 § 7.

[59] 'die Unruhe ihrer Optik'; 'das Convulvische seines Affektes, seine überreizte Sensibilität'. Nietzsche 1969, VI.3 § 7, § 5.

[60] 'Im Theater ist man nur als Masse ehrlich; als Einzelner lügt man, belügt man sich. Man lässt sich selbst zu Hause, wenn man in's Theater geht.' Nietzsche 1969, V.2 § 368.

[61] See Harding 1988. [62] Mayer 1978.

[63] 'Opiaten der Sinne.' Nietzsche 1969, VI.3 § 1; Wohin Wagner gehört. 'die opiatischen und narkotischen Wirkungen'. Borchmeyer and Salaquarda 1994, 2:788–9.

[64] Hanslick 1950, 172. 'Haschisch-Benebelung'. Heyse 1984, 1:465. [65] Nordau 1895, 41.

[66] 'Affektshunger also aus dem beständig wachsenden Hange zu den narkotischen Genussmitteln.' Jentsch 1904, 2:83.

provided a key context and a rich source of metaphor to express fears about Bayreuth's apparent threat to autonomy.

Another constant theme in medical discussions of self-control and autonomy was sexuality. The German physician Eduard Reich, for instance, wrote at length about the 'nervous strength' needed to maintain 'moral hygiene' in the face of sexual passion.[67] The *Gesamtkunstwerk*'s supposed quasi-hypnotic over-stimulation of the sensorium was often depicted as a threat to the rational inhibition of sexuality on which decency, health and public order were understood to depend. While some of the discussion on this subject was end-of-the-pier stuff about what people were getting up to in the darkened auditorium (Nordau fretted about the 'hidden enjoyment' of illicit delights), other critics feared that the over-stimulation of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* would undermine sexual morals and health.[68] In an 1896 discussion of the effects of Wagner on female patients, the American physician Frank Parsons Norbury wrote that the impact of 'sensory fatigue' from 'continuous stimulation of the organs of hearing, of vision, of touch' might lead to the disturbance of 'emotional control' through the effect on 'inhibiting centres', leading to neuritis, insomnia and hysteria, all of which he linked to 'disturbances of the organ peculiar to her sex ... and undue sexual excitement'.[69] Nietzsche picked up on this theme, suggesting that Wagner 'hypnotises the mystical-erotic females by making his music put the spirit of the magnetiseur into her spine (one can observe the physiological effects of the *Lohengrin* prelude on the secretions)'.[70] In literature, too, there are many examples of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* overwhelming the self-control of members of the audience and leading to sexual vice and destruction.[71]

The association of lack of willpower with women and sexuality reflected the widespread assumption that the ideal autonomous subject was implicitly (and often explicitly) masculine, and anxiety about willpower was linked to a sense of crisis in masculinity.[72] From the start, discussion between Wagner, his adherents and opponents had frequently been gendered.[73] The composer's whole aesthetic was in many ways a conscious attempt to impose a serious, German masculine character on opera, an

[67] 'Kraft in den Nerven', 'moralischen Hygiene'. Reich 1868, 153. [68] Nordau 1895, 14.
[69] Norbury 1896, 112–13.
[70] 'er hypnotisiert die mystisch-erotischen Weibchen, indem seine Musik den Geist eines Magnetiseurs bis in ihr Rückenmark hinein fühlbar macht (– man beobachte das Lohengrin Vorspiel in seinen physiologischen Einwirkungen auf die Sekretion und –.' Borchmeyer and Salaquarda 1994, 1025.
[71] See Kennaway 2012c. [72] See Mosse 1996. [73] McClatchie 1998.

artform that – for many – had often seemed dangerously Italian and effeminate. On the other hand, the phantasmagorical character of Wagner's work, the sensual power of its sound and of visual aspect led many critics who distrusted the manipulative power of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* to question the masculinity of its creator and those who took pleasure in experiencing it, reflecting the assumption that passive weakness of will was essentially feminine or homosexual.[74] In this context Wagner's critics were not shy about making insinuations about the composer's close male friendships and fondness for silk.[75] Contemporary science provided support for the idea that manly willpower was under threat from modern culture. Gustav le Bon, for instance, argued that crowds are essentially feminine in their behaviour.[76] Thus, having overcome the female models of Italian opera (a 'harlot') and French opera (a 'coquette') – as Wagner put it in his essay *Opera and Drama* (1851) – he faced criticism that his work was effeminate from a new angle, that of physical stimulation.[77]

## Conclusion

In some ways, the critique of Wagner's work as a matter of physical stimulation was simply a question of fashionable theories being applied to one of the most prominent cultural phenomena of the day. After all, Nordau was happy to suggest that degeneration theory explained almost all European culture of the 1890s, seemingly irrespective of its content. On the other hand, there are vital ways in which the *Gesamtkunstwerk* fitted perfectly with medical thinking about the perils of excessive stimulation of a passive nervous system. The visual aspect played a significant role. The French physician Pierre Bonnier and his brother Charles talked of Wagner's visual powers 'doing away with the autonomy of the audience'.[78] And about the only positive thing that Nordau could bring himself to say about Wagner's conception of the unity of the arts was that Charles Féré's work suggested that 'the ear hears more keenly when the eye is simultaneously stimulated'.[79] The technological control of light and dark, and the manipulation of perception involved in Wagner's 'illusionist' aesthetic and hidden orchestra also left Bayreuth open to medical critiques of its

[74] See Scott 2003, 33–59.
[75] See Spitzer 1906, especially 57–8; 1880, 120–1; Dreyfus 2010, 175–217.
[76] Huyssen 1986, 52. [77] Wagner 1852, 1:186–90. [78] Crary 1999, 253.
[79] Nordau 1895, 175.

intentions. It has also often been argued that Wagner's music aims at overwhelming the audience – he was 'the most impolite genius in the world', in Nietzsche's words.[80] The sheer volume of his enlarged orchestra, the lush instrumentation and in particular his innovative harmony were often depicted as hypnotic or narcotic in character, as noted above. Together, these characteristics rendered the audience passive receivers of stimulation, at least in interpretations that took seriously contemporary theories of the mind.

It is striking that the language of hypnosis, drugs and willpower continued to be widely used in the very different intellectual climate of the Weimar Republic even after such theories had become discredited. It turns out that metaphors and frameworks taken from nineteenth-century theories of brain stimulation were co-opted into the terms of a Marxian false consciousness and its concomitant Culture Industry, which also posited a neutrally manipulated, passive consumer of culture. Adorno and Brecht would speak explicitly in these terms; for the former, Wagner's hidden orchestra is a 'phantasmagorical medium' with the power to impose 'visual attentiveness' and 'manage perception'; for Brecht, by 'melting' the different arts into one mixture, the *Gesamtkunstwerk* would also 'melt down' the spectator, making him or her 'passive', an experience that equated to 'unworthy stimulation' and 'hypnotism'.[81]

Since then, discussions of mass manipulation have tended to draw on similar theories of stimuli and response. For instance, the emergence of the concept of brainwashing in the 1950s, which revived many themes familiar from the debate on Bayreuth, drew directly on Neo-Pavlovian concepts of conditioned response. Even if recent revivals in physiological explanations of human actions and in the concept of willpower (linked to neo-liberalism and increasingly neuro-pharmacological paradigms in contemporary psychiatry) are perhaps laying the foundation for a new discourse of media and stimulation, today theories of the Culture Industry and false consciousness are generally treated historically.[82] However, alongside scepticism about reductionist conceptions of the mind and gendered ideals of

[80] 'das *unhöflichste* Genie der Welt'. Nietzsche 1969, VI.3 90.

[81] Crary 1990, 24. 'Solange eine 'Gesamtkunstwerk' bedeutet, daß die Gesamte ein Aufwachsen ist, solange also Künste 'verschmelzt' werden sollen, müssen die einzelnen Elemente alle gleichermaßen degradiert werden, indem jedes nur Stichwortbringer für das andere sein kann. Der Schmelzprozeß erfaßt den Zuschauer, der ebenfalls eingeschmolzen wird und einem passiven (leidenen) Teil des Gesamtkunstwerks darstellt. Solche Magie ist natürlich zu bekämpfen. Alles, was Hypnotisierversuche darstellen soll, unwürdige Räusche erzeugen muß, benebelt, muß aufgegeben werden.' Brecht 1997, 6:107–8.

[82] See, for example, Tierney and Baumeister 2012.

selfhood, it is important not to lose sight of the real lesson in the debate on Bayreuth's hypnotic powers and their medical, moral and political implications: the need for critical thinking in media. As Umberto Eco put it in a discussion of television, 'A democratic civilization will save itself only if it makes the language of the image into a stimulus for critical reflection – not an invitation for hypnosis.'[83] While he was not speaking of Bayreuth, the concerns to which he gives voice would seem wholly applicable to discourses of sensory manipulation surrounding Wagner's art, even after discounting the hyperbolic language of many of the composer's contemporary critics.

[83] Eco 1979, 15.